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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 GUANGZHOU 000059

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SUBJECT: GUANGZHOU HOUSE CHURCHES - GROWING DESPITE SPORADIC POLICE PRESSURE

(U) Classified by Consul General Robert Goldberg for reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Guangzhou's underground house churches continue to grow, particularly among students and professionals, even in the face of periodic police pressure and oversight of large gatherings and religious training. Church leaders tell us that most area house churches continue to hold services in a relatively open fashion, but they do not associate formally in larger house church networks in order to avoid unwanted attention. Younger house church leaders are willing to communicate with the "Three Self Patriotic Movement" (TSPM) registered churches, particularly in work among student groups and in purchasing legally-printed Bibles and other literature. Church leaders view social welfare outreach as an increasingly important part of their work but keep these efforts small scale to avoid visibility. Church leaders disagree strongly on whether foreign sources of funding benefit their ministries; some argue that perceptions of mismanagement could undermine their credibility. End summary.

Decentralized and Expanding Among Educated Elite

12. (C) House churches in the Guangzhou area continue to grow at a steady rate among urban professionals, according to Daniel Zhao (strictly protect), pastor of a large house church in the suburb of Panyu. Zhao said that he and other leaders in Guangzhou had a "strong desire to start new churches among young professionals and students." They are moving forward with this effort, having launched several churches in the newly developed Tianhe area of central Guangzhou. Among students, there are now at least five regular house church meetings at Guangzhou's University New Town, home to six of Guangdong's major universities. Zhao also knows of at least ten groups meeting on other campuses across Guangzhou and added there were likely many more he was not aware of.

13. (C) House churches in Guangdong overall remain decentralized, primarily operating as individual congregations typically ranging from 30 to 50 members, although a few groups of up to 200 members meet in area restaurants and hotels. House church leaders agreed that linking congregations together, even informally through associations, would create unwanted scrutiny from government authorities. James Jia (strictly protect), also pastor of several smaller Panyu churches, reinforced the point saying, "churches here do not have a coordinated relationship with each other, although they do have a strong identity with their local members, and the immediate community around them." He suggested that house churches grow primarily through neighbor and personal contacts. Jia indicated that when a group goes above 50 members, it should "split", and continue

to meet in homes "where there is no question about legality." While Jia knows such home meetings are still technically illegal, in reality the Religious Affairs Bureau, and local police are less likely to monitor such gatherings, focusing instead on larger groups in more open venues.

Christians Clustering in Complexes

14. (C) One growing phenomenon in Guangzhou is the clustering of churches in specific apartment complexes. For instance, the Riverside Garden complex in Panyu, home to over 40,000 people, has an estimated ten house churches. Church member Christina Zhou (strictly protect) said that "Christians all across Guangzhou know about the fellowships at Riverside Garden" and more and more Christians are moving there for closer proximity to other house church members. One way they attract new members, according to Zhou, is the Riverside Garden tradition of holding a Christmas party, organized by the house churches. This past Christmas, according to Zhou, government officials initially told Riverside Garden managers they could not host the Christmas event. However, officials ultimately backed down, when managers from the complex said this was an "important cultural event" for the complex, attended by both Christians and non-Christians.

Police Monitoring - Pressure Applied Sporadically

15. (C) House church leaders agreed there is increasing freedom for small house churches to meet openly in Guangzhou. However, Pastor Zhao said that certain activities attract greater attention from

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government authorities: foreign involvement and speakers; coordinated movements and organization between house churches; and hosting nationally known house church leaders from other provinces. In these instances, police monitor the house church meetings closely and occasionally interrupt or close down a meeting. When closing a meeting, police typically ask the members to disperse after taking their names and questioning the leaders on-site. They rarely take church leaders to the police station for further questioning. House church leaders we met were not aware of any recent situations where police had held leaders at a police station for more than a few hours.

16. (C) Pastor Zhao also related an incident at a large Christmas Eve house church gathering of more than 400 people at Guangzhou's Star Hotel. Shortly after the sermon began, the hotel cut power to the large room (but not the rest of the hotel). With the only light provided by hundreds of cell phones, the manager told meeting organizers there were technical problems and the meeting needed to end. Zhao and other organizers replied that they would not pay the rental fee for a room without power. After a few minutes deliberation, the hotel -- apparently preferring the money -- restored power, and the meeting continued without further interruption.

17. (C) Pentecostal churches, known for such practices as speaking in tongues and healing services, attract the most attention from authorities, according to Pastor "Auntie Yang" (first name not disclosed -- strictly protect), a U.S.-trained house church pastor who has served in Guangzhou for over 20 years. In December, police interrupted a Pentecostal church meeting at a restaurant in Panyu and told the owner he could no longer rent to any Christian groups, Pentecostal or otherwise. Several congregations using the restaurant, including Yang's own, have since split into smaller groups and are now meeting, for the time being, in nearby homes.

Guangzhou Less Open than Northern China?

18. (C) Pastor Auntie Yang disputed the notion that government monitoring of house church gatherings in Guangdong Province was less intrusive than in northern China. In Guangzhou, she said, "there is the external appearance of openness, and in the north things are more closed," but "this is not necessarily true." She noted that she had

attended Christian festivals in the north with more than 10,000 people and no police interruption, something she believes could never happen in Guangzhou. Plus, in the south, people are "more concerned with money," and "don't have the level of devotion," so there is not as much interest in large events as in the north. She added that given the much smaller percentage of Christians in Guangdong, "the government is less open about Christianity, since it is not perceived as traditionally Chinese," so "they perceive any larger Christian gatherings as political activity."

Rural Churches Face Greater Restrictions

¶9. (C) Some church leaders believe that house churches in rural areas outside of Guangzhou experience greater police scrutiny, compared to those in the urban core. Pastor Feng (first name not provided -- strictly protect), an elderly evangelist and pastor working and traveling between several smaller communities two hours east of Guangzhou, over the past year has been interrogated several times by police for "five to six hours at a time." Feng knows he attracts extra police attention with his open style of preaching and baptizing. But, Feng says this is "his calling," even if it means an occasional kick in the shins. Feng, together with three other pastors in the area, now leads six congregations. Approximately 70 percent of the membership of these churches is composed of elderly women. However, Feng pointed out that increasing numbers of returning unemployed migrant workers had recently joined. Feng said that despite his occasional mistreatment by police, government officials generally viewed house church Christians as a positive influence in his community, especially because of their efforts to provide food and clothing to the poor and give "encouragement to the unemployed." Feng says that he will "gradually change the hearts of all the government officials."

¶10. (C) Feng's younger colleague, Rev. Lau Hui Zhen (strictly protect), a former police detective himself, has been a house church pastor for ten years, after being ordained by a Korean church

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training group. Lau's goal is to train younger leaders to start new churches, and he sees Feng as a pioneer and "mentor" who encourages him in his work. Lau said that police would often "interrupt training sessions" because they were more concerned about a network of new churches. Lau emphasized that often foreigners see the situation in Guangdong as much more open, but that "from the inside we are still monitored closely." For instance, Lau said that during the Olympics police had detained three local church leaders who were conducting training sessions, although none were held overnight.

Building Bridges to the Registered Church?

¶11. (C) The relationship between leaders of house churches and the government-registered churches is one point of change in Guangzhou, and views of house church pastors vary widely. Most younger, educated house church leaders seem receptive to increasing bridges of communication with registered church leaders, while older leaders continue to view the registered church with great skepticism. Several younger leaders, including Pastor Zhao, were trained in TSPM seminaries in Nanjing or Guangzhou and even served as leaders in registered churches. Zhao's house churches are actually rooted in Guangzhou's historic Dongshan church, where in 1999 Zhao led a young adult ministry. The group "grew from 30 to almost 700 in one year," according to Zhao, but because the group had more Pentecostal leanings, the pastor of the Dongshan church was no longer comfortable allowing them to meet at the church. Consequently, Zhao left "amicably," and says he still "respects" the Dongshan church leadership. Acknowledging their common core beliefs, Zhao said "we need to build bridges to the TSPM (registered) churches." But, he added one caution: "If you get too close, they will control you. If you are too far away, they will try hard to find out what you are doing."

¶12. (C) In some cases, the line between house church and registered church is blurred, especially among university student groups. Some registered church leaders are even supportive of house church

movements on campuses. Rev. Huang Tianhua (strictly protect), Professor at the TSPM Guangdong Union Theological Seminary in Guangzhou, expressed some frustration over the relatively slow growth of registered churches in Guangdong and sees this an incentive for the registered church to reach out more actively to house church leaders to understand their situation. Huang said that Guangdong official church membership was only 330,000 out of a population of 100 million, but membership in house churches among the educated elite was "much more significant." He speculated there were more Christians attending house churches near universities in Guangdong than total members in all the registered churches. Although technically not approved, Rev. Huang sometimes preaches in these house churches. Many student Christian groups are loosely tied to a registered church as an official "meeting point," which is now allowed without having a designated ordained pastor. Huang said the registered church was seeking to expand this process, not only because it drew younger people into the registered churches, but also because it gave student groups an official stamp of approval to meet openly.

Buying Legal Bibles an Important Bridge

¶13. (C) One important connection between Guangzhou house churches and the registered church is in sharing of printed resources. All the house church pastors we met confirmed they routinely purchase Bibles and Christian literature from the registered churches -- at very low cost, in sufficient quantity and printed legally in China. None of the pastors we met voiced concern about revealing their identity when ordering these materials. In fact, many pastors, including rural-based Pastor Feng, said his congregation all used the legal Bibles. A few felt that having Hong Kong printed Bibles and Christian materials in their churches may actually create some risk or give the government a reason to interrupt their services. But most pastors had no concern either way, almost considering this a non-issue. Some simply dismissed the issue saying, "it's cheaper to print the Bibles in China."

Meeting Social Needs - Yes but Informally

¶14. (C) Many house church leaders would like their churches to play a more significant role in meeting the social needs of the community

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and beyond, as an expression of their faith. However, because they lack official status, they cannot launch coordinated effort or even tie their efforts to the name of a particular church. House church leaders admit that such freedom to serve in the community is an advantage for the registered church. Rev. Huang Xiao Ning (strictly protect) noted that most members of his church are actually very involved in volunteer work at a personal level, ranging from counseling, to weekly food distribution among Guangzhou's urban poor, to foster care, to collecting relief supplies for poor provinces. He said their members often volunteered with other organizations and added "we can't put a label on our joint efforts, saying that this is from our church." However, "the people know we are Christians." Huang said the most important thing was to extend care in God's name -- "No one needs to take credit for it."

Foreign Funding - Accountability a Concern

¶15. (C) A major divergence of opinion between house church leaders we met was over the issue of foreign funding and especially whether money for pastors' salaries should come from foreign donors. Several pastors voiced a very strong view that congregations in wealthier areas, such as Panyu, now have sufficient financial means to fully support a pastor even though some pastors continue to receive income from foreign sources and through other vocations as well. "The main issue is accountability" said Pastor James Jia. He pointed out that just the perception that funds were not managed openly would hurt the credibility of the pastor. Church leaders said the main sources of outside funding were Hong Kong churches, followed by Taiwan, and then the United States. Even Pastor Feng, who works in poorer rural areas, has recently changed his attitude about receiving foreign

money, saying that since 2007 he is "no longer taking support from the outside," in part "because the government uses this as an argument against him."

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